

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL JOHN RISCASSI, COMMANDER, 2ND STRYKER CAVALRY REGIMENT, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION BAGHDAD, AND LIEUTENANT COLONEL BRYAN DENNY, DEPUTY COMMANDER, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): And on the line with us we've got Andrew Lubin with ON Point, Bruce McQuain with the QandO blog, and Paul McLeary with the Columbia Journalism Review.

And Paul, who are you writing for?

Q This is going to be for Defense Technology International.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Defense Technology International. All right. Very good. Thank you, sir. Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And with us on the line, Colonel John RisCassi, with the -- he's the commander of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, 25th Infantry, at the MND-Baghdad. And Colonel, the floor is yours. Do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. RISCASSI: We can jump right to questions, but I'll just tell you where we stand right now.

Just to clarify a point, commander of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment -- there's no 25th Infantry Division in there.

I think you -- what -- I was told you wanted to hear about our first 30 days in Iraq, in Baghdad, and I'll tell you a little bit about that so far.

We have assumed duties from the Arrowhead Brigade around 13 September. We were operating in Baghdad approximately three weeks prior to that, but we officially took over on the 13th. We assumed their role as the above-ground force, which is really the 1st Cav Division, the MND-B Commander Strike Force.

Currently the regiment owns no land. We're not a land-owning regiment, although we have battalions throughout the Baghdad AO working for other brigade combat teams.

Currently, the regiment is a strike force mission, and for approximately about three-and-a-half weeks we've been working in the East Rashid district going after the bad guys and doing very, very well and trying to give a little

hope to the Iraqis that live in that AO so they don't have to live in fear anymore. And we've been pretty good.

I think we're going to wrap that mission up here in a week or so and then be off -- on to different matters throughout the Baghdad AO, wherever the division commander would like to put the emphasis of a Stryker brigade. As you know, it's a very mobile force. (Lots of ?) the soldiers get out the back. And everybody seems to want a piece of us, to do some action down here just for our mobility and really for the number of soldiers that we can put on the ground.

Other than that, things, I think, have been going very well, and it's been a very, very busy 30 days. I was out and about today down in one of my squadron's AO, and they were actually recruiting some Iraqi security volunteers in their combat outposts. That's at COP Aztec. It was going very, very well, watched the end processing of that. And we'll put those guys to work down in their AO as soon as they get through the whole vetting process and it's approved by the government of Iraq for these Iraqis to go ahead and do some work there.

And with that, I'll open it up to any questions that you all may have. Just so you know, I have Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Denny sitting here also, and he is the deputy commander of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment. So he's here in case you have any questions there for him.

So go ahead.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much.

Andrew Lubin, why don't you get us started.

Q Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Thank you very taking the time to join us this afternoon. Sir, two questions, one briefly. Can you orient us as far as where East Rashid is? You know, we're all familiar CPIC and Camp Victory, but if you could kind of orient us from there.

But well, specific question -- what are your relations, and how are things going with the concerned citizens group? And do you have them in your area? COL. RISCASSI: Well, first of all, let me orient you to East Rashid. I've got to open my map.

You know, if you were to say -- basically the best way I can tell you is just south of the IZ, you know, across the Tigris two times, and you're in Rasheed, in East Rasheed. So that will get you in the general area.

As far as the East Rasheed forces, the concerned citizens, right now, this is how we look at the population. We have a populace down there that is basically being bullied into doing things they don't want to do, harboring al Qaeda or thugs or bad guys, whatever you want to call them, down there. And that's what we have down there.

I'm not working with any specific concerned citizens group. What we are working and recruiting is a term called Iraqi security volunteers. Those are guys that work or, excuse me, that live in the area that we recruit from. That is a requirement.

And then they go to work and not on necessarily our priorities but on the government of Iraq's priorities and doing -- securing a route, for example, or securing a fixed site for the Iraqis. For example, any type of facility --

might be a generator, for example, that needs some security. Those are the guys we're working with, Iraqi security volunteers.

Now, in our area, we have just started that process, because we've just been in here. First, we had to secure East Rasheed and then we had to move on from there, and we're just now getting into the Iraqi security volunteers. We also work with the national police in that, in East Rasheed, as well as -- we just started working with Iraqi forces as of yesterday.

That's the big key of success here, is doing what we do and then turning it over as quickly as we can to put an Iraqi face on it so the Iraqi people can see their own securing and taking care of them. And that seems to go a long way. They don't necessarily want us to leave but when they have a force there to take care of them, they are a lot more comfortable about going about their business day to day.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yeah, it does.

Just quickly are you in the JAM stronghold area? Or are you just talking overall thugs and insurgents? COL. RISCASSI: No, we're not. You know, it's a tough one. I'd like to say they are bad guys. I am right now, we believe in an al Qaeda stronghold, one of the last strongholds in Iraq. There are some faultlines down there between Shi'a and Sunni and so, you know, that is apparent.

But you know, when you're on the ground there and you talk to the citizens that live there, they will just call them bad guys. And Shi'a, Sunni - - I mean, there are bad guys going around down there, whether they're al Qaeda, they're thugs or whatever. You know, when we get into the upper level staff, we start looking at who they are. And it helps us to develop forces of action to go after them.

But on the ground there, it's just -- for example, I talked to an older gentleman a few days ago, and he's been living there for 25 years. And he just called them bad people, and this was a bad place with bad people in it.

He didn't care where they came from. That's sort of where we're dealing with in that AO.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Bruce McQuain.

Q Yeah. Colonel, Bruce McQuain with Q&O.net. To the extent you can, I'm interested in hearing how, A, you develop the missions that your strike force does; and B, the type missions. I assume there are different types of missions that your strike force is going out on?

COL. RISCASSI: Yeah, good question. On the bigger -- on the bigger picture, how I develop missions is my boss, General Fil, the division commander, says, "I need 2SCR to go do this." And he gives me a task and purpose, and we go in there and do that. So, basically he defines the area for me that I can go operate in.

As far as the type missions, you know, you think across the full spectrum of operations. Although we're not a landowner, you know, I'm an above-ground force, so when I take that on, I am strictly kinetic when I go in there. However, you just can't think that way all the time. In that same time that I'm doing the kinetic piece, I have a squadron in there, like I told you, operating, hiring Iraqi security volunteers. We've had a huge delivery of propane to the people in East Rashid. We're doing street repair, utility repair, laying on those contracts for the people. So, you know, it's a full spectrum of operations here, even though an above-ground force.

Now, a lot of the time, since I'm operating in another landowner's AO, we direct those things through him to make sure that he's following those so there's some long-term oversight on some of these projects. But how I get the missions, again, is -- the boundaries are defined by the division commander, and then within that boundary I sort of figure out, by doing some analysis with the two, getting a brief from the staff, and then I sort of -- and then I'll give direction and a task and purpose for each or organization, then we move out from there.

Q Appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. RISCASSI: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Paul McLeary.

Q Hi. It's Paul McLeary from Defense Technology International. One, the Iraqi volunteers -- are you tracking the sectarian makeup, or are they mostly Sunni? Shi'a? A mix of the two?

COL. RISCASSI: For us down here, you know, that's a good question. Where I'm talking specifically right now is a Sunni area. So they will be strictly Sunni volunteers to go out in that AO.

My area is pretty broad right now. So in that particular AO, where Cop Aztec is, that's sort of on my eastern flank. That's strictly a Sunni area.

So we tried -- whatever the makeup would be of the neighborhood -- we call them mahalas -- that you're trying to recruit these volunteers for, you will recruit the makeup of that mahala, whether it's Sunni or Shi'a.

Now I can't speak for all of Baghdad, how that's working, but I know it's working really well on the Sunni side, so far. And you'd have to ask another brigade commander that owns a Shi'a population how well that's taking off there.

Q Sure. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Is anyone else -- any follow-up question?

Q Yeah. I actually have a follow-up. As far as the -- I see that you found over 30 IEDs over the past month, I believe. I'm just curious how you're tracking these IEDs, how you're finding them, what technology you're using, or is it just kind of, you know, eyes on wires or, you know, trash or something on the side of the road, and if you could speak to that a little bit.

COL. RISCASSI: Yeah, the -- no, great question. We're finding them in any way you can imagine. As far as these 30, just so you know, I don't want to give you an exact number, but it's more than double that. We found 30 in the first 72 hours we were there. But I'll tell you how we do it. First of all, we do a good analysis by -- say, "Hey, if you were the bad guy, where would you put these things?" And we lay down a template, and we'll look at it hard that way.

The second is, we're working hard with the local nationals, the people that live there. They don't want these things on their streets either. So we have tips lines. We have sources, and they come forward, and they tell us where they are. Then we have EOD go in there and confirm or deny whether that exists or not.

And then of course, we have -- like you said, we have other methods of determining where they are.

But you just can't rely on one. You have to use everything, you have to think they're going to put them, you have to use the tips line and everything you have. That is a weapon of choice around here, as you guys know, and we take it very serious. We go as slow as we need to to figure this out, and then once we deny the area that -- the IEDs in there, we keep them from coming back and putting them in.

Q Okay, and a quick follow-up. Are you finding any house- borne IEDs, houses rigged to explode, or are they mostly on the roads?

COL. RISCASSI: No, they're mostly on the roads, but we've had our share of house-borne IEDs down there. You know, the great question is to say whether they were recently put in there because of our presence or they've been in there for quite some time. I couldn't tell you that, but we've had a few of those, less than 10. It's a relatively recent phenomenon for us in the past week or so, but that's another very dangerous thing.

So again, we use the local nationals' tips where we think those are. You know, we look for wires. We study it very, very hard to see if there's any indicator where these may be. We've got working military dogs, you know, explosive-sniffing dogs, to try to determine where these houses are.

Again, in a population where people are living all over the place, you know, you see empty houses, you automatically think that there's something that may be in that house. So we're looking at it hard. We have seen it recently, but it's under about 10.

Q Okay. And what are some of the telltale signs of a house- borne IED?

COL. RISCASSI: You know, I don't know if there's a telltale sign. I can't tell you there's any one way they do it.

But I will tell you just from what we've been through down here, again, if it's in a neighborhood that has a lot of IEDs, there's nobody living in the house -- the most telltale sign is someone tells you that's a bad house and there's something in there. You look for victim-operated things, a wire, something to step on -- you know, there might be a rug in there that's lifted up. Anything that looks unusual, you know, you treat as suspect. Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

Q Yeah, Colonel. Andrew Lubin again from ON Point. If you could talk to us, please, about the attack in Camp Victory this morning, do you have any idea where the mortar rounds -- what area where the mortar rounds came from?

And this had to be, from what we're hearing back here, 41, 42, wounded and several dead, this had to be more than just a sporadic one-or-two- shotter, wouldn't it?

COL. RISCASSI: Yeah, I think, you've hit it right on the head there. You know, I think you got the numbers about right. If you want to -- if you -- the wounded -- the dead is correct. The wounded is right, if you count the local nationals that were wounded in action. The -- we know exactly where it was fired from.

Again you know, this is the big VBC, Victory Base Complex. You know, there's tens of thousands of folks down here. It's very large. And they fired, you know, depending on what report you read, you know, 7 to 14 -- I believe they were 107-millimeter rockets -- into VBC over a pretty good spread. And obviously they hit some areas and caused some damage.

Q Did this hit one area in the camp? Or just kind of sporadically they landed just randomly through the whole area?

COL. RISCASSI: You know, it's tough for me to say, because I don't know what their intent was. They all did not hit in the same exact place -- different areas.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right, anything else, anybody else?

Well, Colonel, do you have any closing thoughts, closing comments for us?

COL. RISCASSI: No, hey, thanks for hearing our story today. And you know, the soldiers are doing a fantastic job. We get out and see them every day we can -- young kids trained well, representing the nation wonderfully, and I'm extremely proud of them. If you can get that in there any way, you know, please print it.

They're great kids. You know, these are 18-to-21-year-olds, the future of our nation, out here doing tough, very, very hard work. And you all should be proud of them.

They're great kids. You know, these are 18 and 21-year-olds, the future of our nation, out here doing tough, very, very hard work, and you all should be proud of them.

That's it.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Before you go, Andrew Lubin again. Colonel, can I send some follow-up questions to you through Jack Holt?

STAFF (?): Jack, you got the colonel's contact details over there?

MR. HOLT: Yeah, I can work that through Lieutenant Commander Anderson at MNF-I. We can work that out. So that --

Q Colonel, I --

COL. RISCASSI: Yeah, that works for me.

Q Great. Then give me half an hour and I'll have some follow-up stuff in an e-mail to you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

And thank you, Colonel. Colonel John S. Riscassi, who is the commander, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, Multinational Division Baghdad. Thank you for being with us. And hopefully, we can speak again a little farther down the road.

COL. RISCASSI: All right, thank you. Thank you. Appreciate it. Out here.

Q Thank you, sir.

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